No. 29

PRIVILEGE AND OBLIGATION.

A SERMON

PREACHED AT THE OPENING OF THE

Reformed Presbyterian Synod

OF IRELAND.

BY

REV. R. A. M'FARLANE, M.A., B.D.,

STRANORLAR.

(PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.)

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MAN is a being of extremes. Shunning Scylla he is apt to fall into Charybdis. Avoiding one error he is prone to run into its opposite. Of this principle we have no more impressive illustration than in the attitude which he assumes towards Divine truth. He unfurls the banner of infidelity, or, escaping this error, he makes the truth his Saviour,—rests in a Pharisaic formality. That this is the evil to which Covenanters are specially exposed is my deep conviction. To indicate this danger—to place a beacon light on this rock which frowns beside our pathway—has been my object in the following discourse. Written without the remotest design of publication, it is now sent forth, at Synod's request, with the earnest prayer that the Master may deign to employ it in subserving His own glory and the good of our beloved Zion.

PRIVILEGE AND OBLIGATION.

"What do ye more than others?"—Matthew v. 47.

THE Christian religion may be viewed under a twofold aspect—a subjective and an objective. Subjectively considered, it is synonymous with godliness—it expresses the sum total of those gracious results in the living man which are ever found where the truth is received in the love of it—imperfectly here, but perfectly beyond the grave. Objectively considered, it is that system of doctrine revealed in Holy Scripture which is an emanation of the glory of Deity, and whose grand design is to bring man back to God and prepare him for a higher life in glory.

Regarded under its subjective aspect, religion comprises two great elements—faith and works. Faith, in its wider sense, is belief of the truth; in its more limited sense, it is the quickened soul's willing response to that Gospel which calls us to the Saviour. Works are the acts of obedience to the Divine law which are performed by the believer.

In the words which form the theme of our meditations, the second of these great constituents of subjective or personal religion is the more prominent. No doubt the great question here propounded has primarily a more specific reference. Christianity is exalted in its origin, its nature, and its purposes. It is designed to lift us from the low level of a fallen state and to exalt us in dignity and

glory. "The righteous is more excellent than his neighbour." And this principle covers the whole of man's being. It embraces not only the grand essentials of human character, but those things which might be regarded as non-essential. And of this principle the Scripture before us furnishes an illustration:—"If ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? Do not even the Publicans so?" Our Lord here sets the seal of His approbation to the graces of the human character. We should be courteous—courteous, not only to our peers and superiors, but to the humblest member of society. Christianity, when rightly understood, does not leave a man a barbarian, with the garb and the address of the untutored savage. It embodies the principles and enjoins the practice of the highest etiquette. The Christian should be a gentleman, and not a boor. And, just in so far as we realize such a spirit and such a life, in just so far do we advance in true dignity, and reflect the glory of Him in whom all perfection finds its centre and its source. But though our text has thus primarily a specific application it will not be a breach of any canon of Scripture interpretation to generalize this important inquiry, and view it in its bearing on the wider field of Christian character and life. Thus regarded our text involves two great principles which, in dependence on the Spirit of all grace, we propose to make the groundwork of a brief discourse.

FIRST—THE PRINCIPLE OF PROVIDENTIAL ELECTION TO SPECIAL FAVOUR.

The doctrine of the Divine Providence is one of the cardinal articles of the Christian creed. He at whose fiat creation sprang into being sways the sceptre of the universe. "His kingdom ruleth over all." And this is one of the most important truths of our holy religion. "Thy God reigneth!" This is the most joyful message proclaimed in

Zion—this the brightest hope which cheers the gloom of a sin-ruined world.

Among the principles embodied in the Divine law and illustrated in the Divine Providence, the doctrine of election occupies a conspicuous place. It is true this doctrine is involved in mystery. It stretches beyond the horizon of that world which is swept by human eyes. But incomprehensibility is no apology for infidelity. Such a principle would lay the axe to the very root of religion. Its logical outcome is blank atheism. Let it suffice for us to know that this doctrine is written upon the page of inspiration in characters of light, and illustrated from age to age in the providence of God. The term *election* is employed in a twofold sense. It signifies choice to external privileges, or choice to those privileges and that grace of which they are the means. These two applications of the term must not be confounded as they have sometimes been. They are separable both in thought and historic illustration. "They are not all Israel which are of Israel." Within the limits of nominal Christendom there has ever been the narrower circle of those who are "called, chosen, and faithful." The doctrine in its higher application does not here emerge. It has its special bearing on the Church invisible. Dealing, as we are, with a section of the Church visible, we are shut up to the discussion of its wider, and inferior, but yet all-important aspect. That this principle is well founded we need not wait to prove. It has its roots in Scripture, and may be traced in every page of the world's history. The world has never been involved in total darkness, nor has the effulgence of unclouded day ever flooded its hills and vales. The darkness and the light have ever been commingled. Some have possessed the truth, while others have never enjoyed this priceless boon. And why is this? Why does Britain rejoice in the Gospel's glorious liberty while China, with its

teeming millions, groans beneath the yoke of the enemy? You may try to solve the question on philosophic grounds—you may appeal to the principles of geography and ethnography—but in vain. In the last resort the fact resolves itself into an inscrutable mystery of Providence. We can but bow before the throne of the Eternal and exclaim, in grateful adoration, "Even so Father, for so it seemed good in Thy sight!" The application of the elective principle to the land in which we live is thus most evident. In common with our nation we have been distinguished by special favour. Divine truth sheds around us its celestial radiance. We sit beside that river whose streams make glad the city of our God. Freedom's banner floats above our heads. Fenced round on every side by God's own hand we dwell in safety from the enemy. We enjoy a heritage of blessing, temporal and spiritual, which is the glory of Britain and the envy of the world.

But this heritage, though to a great extent peculiar to us as a nation, is enjoyed in common with the Churches of our land. If, however, we restrict our thoughts to our own sphere, we find a special illustration of elective Providence, a heritage of peculiar privilege which lays us under special obligation.

We have an illustrious ancestry.

> We boast not that we owe our birth
> To loins enthroned, or princes of the earth,
> But higher far our proud pretensions rise.

We trace our origin to God's kingdom in its palmiest days on earth. We reckon among our ecclesiastical ancestors the Hendersons, the Rutherfords, the Camerons, the Pedens, the Cargills, and the Renwicks—those noble Christian heroes of the Second Reformation of whom the world was not worthy, and whose names encircle our Zion with a halo of imperishable glory. And while it is true that grace flows in no

human channel, and that every Church, like every individual, must be the author of her honour or dishonour, it nevertheless holds good that such an ancestry is a special favour, and lays us under special obligation. The prayers, the toils and sufferings of these men were not in vain. As princes they had power with God and prevailed. They have transmitted to us a heritage of priceless blessing. They have set before us the grandest ideals of Christian character.

They remind us,
We can make our lives sublime;
And departing, leave behind us,
Footprints on the sands of time.

The lamp of the divine word burns with undimmed glory in our sanctuaries.

The Church is no mere human institution. She does not plead human authority for her existence, or rest on the principles of human wisdom as her basis or her guide. God himself is her founder. His word is the law of her life. It is the grand instrument for the accomplishment of her work. It is the bulwark which shields her from danger, the two-edged sword with which her battles are fought and her victories achieved. Rob the Church of this heaven-sent boon, and you paralyze her strength, you sweep away her safeguards, and leave her captive in the enemy's hands.

This principle, so important and so evident, has rarely obtained full recognition. Brought into contact with divine truth, the human mind soon manifests its pride and tendency to error. Man presumes to sit in judgment on the divine word, and to lay impious hands on that which God himself has perfected. Hardly a doctrine which has not been assailed—hardly an ordinance which has not been corrupted. The foundations of Zion have been shaken, and her very existence imperilled. Of this truth the Church's

history, past and present, furnishes the most striking illustration. Rome, with a presumption most appalling, has ascended the throne of God, and placed His law beneath her feet. Prelacy, through Rationalism and Ritualism, joins hands with Infidelity and Popery. And other Churches while, maintaining a general fidelity to truth, which we rejoice to recognize, cannot be accorded a full acquittal from the charge of seeking out human inventions in doctrine or in worship. But amid general defection, and while the cry of heresy is heard from every point of the compass, it is a matter for profound gratitude that the lamp of the divine word still sheds its undimmed glory through our Zion. The law of God is enthroned in our midst; the gospel in its integrity and purity is proclaimed; the ordinances of grace, undeformed by human hands, are observed in our sanctuaries. Our Zion stands in all her celestial glory. And if God has thus done great things for us—if we still retain in all its integrity that most precious deposit which has ever been committed to human keeping, are we not laid under special obligation to give glory to His name?

We have been preserved from those civil connections in which other Churhes have been entangled to their injury.

The Church's relation to the State is a question which has long been discussed, and on which the greatest divergence of opinion has emerged. Some have held that the Church is a creature of the State,—others that the State is a creature of the Church,—while others still, affirm that Church and State are not only distinct organisations, but that they have no relation, unless, indeed, it be a relation of antagonism. But such theories can adduce no Scriptural warrant. The true theory is that Church and State are co-ordinate institutions, each having its own sphere, and both their correlations. They are both ordained of God. Both have the same King, both are under the same law, and the grand

purpose of both is to promote the Divine glory and the good of man. But while Church and State have thus a common Author and a common end, they must not be identified. The State has no jurisdiction *in sacris*, the Church has no jurisdiction *in civilibus*. Nevertheless, while each has its own sphere and its peculiar work, they are not antagonistic. They have mutual interests and duties, and should go hand in hand in advancing the cause of God and of humanity. This ideal relation of Church and State has been but seldom realized on earth. But few have learned to "render unto Cæsar the things which be Cæsar's, and unto God the things which be God's." The Church has enslaved the State, or the State has enslaved the Church. Bound to the royal chariot-wheels, the Church's energies have been impaired, she has degenerated into an engine of State, and become the prey of countless evils. But from all such evils our Covenanted Zion has been preserved. Our hands have worn no golden manacles; no royal gift has dimmed our vision; we have never been bribed to connive at evil, or become the instruments of wrong. In the full enjoyment of the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, we have been enabled to maintain a testimony for all truth, and against all evil, praying and hoping for the glorious era yet to dawn when Emmanuel shall be recognized as King, and His word as law; and when Church and State, the loyal ministers of His will, shall co-operate in the great work of removing evil, and of promoting the cause of righteousness, and peace, and joy throughout the earth.

SECOND—THE PRINCIPLE OF CO-ORDINATE OBLIGATION.

The *vis consequentiæ* here must be evident to every thoughtful mind. The principle of co-ordinate obligation is everywhere bound up with human institutions, and illustrated in the affairs of men. Benefits conferred are expected, not merely to evoke a grateful response, but a response

proportioned to their worth. Human law not only recognizes the debtor's obligation, but his obligation to repay his creditor in full. And the same great principle is sanctioned by the Divine authority, and obtains in God's kingdom in the earth. We are not only responsible to Him from whom we have derived our being and all our blessings, but our responsibility is proportioned to the faculties with which we have been endowed, and the blessings which we have received. "Unto whomsoever much is given of him shall be much required." And, brethren, this principle has an important bearing on ourselves. As a Church and as individuals God has given us much, and from us much will be required. If we have been chosen to special privilege, we lie under obligation of corresponding moment.

The field which here opens up before our eyes is vast in its extent. Time would fail us to sweep its limits however hastily. We can but glance at a few of the ideas which invite and claim our thought. And here we may premise that, though the external side of subjective religion is the more prominent in our text, this does not preclude all reference to its internal aspect. These two are so closely linked together that it is difficult to make either the subject of exclusive investigation.

The first and most obvious thought which here suggests itself is, that as God has selected us as the objects of peculiar favour, our piety should be specially exalted in its character.

Among the ideas which enter into our conception of Deity, not the least important is that of goodness. And in that Great Being revealed in Scripture, and whose we are and whom we serve, this idea is realized in all its fulness. "God is good!" this is the central truth of the Bible, and one which is illustrated in the experience of all created beings. The universe is a vast theatre, in which His goodness is displayed. It is the source of heaven's joys, and of

all those countless blessings with which the earth is filled. The goodness of God has been shown to man in ways that cannot be numbered, but the one manifestation of the Divine goodness which transcends all others is the gift of His only begotten Son, and the revelation of that truth which is our only guide to the Saviour and to heaven.

This truth has not been revealed to man for a merely speculative purpose. It is intensely practical in its nature and its aims. It is designed and fitted to save the soul, to transform us into that Divine image with which man was invested at creation. And our purposes should ever be in harmony with the will of God. He has given us the truth to enlighten, to elevate, and to sanctify our nature. We should give earnest heed that we employ it for this glorious purpose, and that we possess a character and conversation becoming the Gospel.

But as Covenanters we are under special obligation to this duty. Enriched with special privilege we should be better than others. From the language of some professors one would suppose that he is the best Covenanter who exhibits most pride, and who is loudest in boasting of his privileges, and in denouncing others. Such, at least, is not our conception of the ideal Covenanter; nay, we may go further and affirm that such is not the Divine conception of our duty. He is the best Covenanter who bears most likeness to our Covenant God. And to the attainment of this exalted character the truth is both an instrument and a motive. It is a glass, gazing into which the believer is changed, by the Divine Spirit, into the image of the Lord. It is a heaven-sent gift which should fill every heart with gratitude, and stimulate the most apathetic to seek to be perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect. And, brethren, have we not the instruments and the motives to the highest type of piety? The Divine glory which surrounds our Zion should invest our character and life. More highly

favoured, we should be better than others. We should cherish more of the Spirit, and reflect more of the image of the Master, lest our privileges be to us, not a crown of glory, but a crown of shame—lest first on earth we be found last before the bar of God.

Again, we should guard with special vigilance the truth committed to our keeping.

The truth has not sprung from earth or found its origin with man. It is heaven-born. Like every blessing we enjoy it comes from the Great Parent of all good. And the truth has not been given to man for nought. It is designed to serve the grandest of all purposes—to be the regenerator of a sin-ruined world. And this the great adversary of God and man knows full well. And hence it has ever been his policy to assail the truth, to lead man to corrupt, to mutilate, or fling away this priceless gift. And oftentimes, alas! with perilous success. Men in their madness have sought to extinguish this lamp which mercy's hand has kindled in this land of darkness and the shadow of death. To defeat the efforts of the enemy and to preserve this divine deposit is the interest of all and the special duty of the Church of Christ. She is the "ground of the truth," the basis on which the temple of truth rests, and which, when once subverted, the temple itself must crumble into ruins. To this great work the Church is called of God, to hold fast the truth; like the Roman vestals of old, to keep this sacred fire burning in the midst of Zion, until God's purposes have been accomplished, the mission of the truth fulfilled, and the Church's work on earth consumated. And this guardianship should embrace *the whole* truth. The enemy is a cunning foe. He never appears, Satan confessed, and commands us to fling our Bible overboard. He tries to filch the truth from us piecemeal. Hence it is that we hear of truths essential and non-essential—truths of small importance and which may be left

open questions, or consigned to a merited oblivion. But such a line of argument is unworthy of a Christian. It involves an impeachment of the Divine wisdom, and a direct assault upon the truth itself. All truth comes from God. And, as in the field of nature, everything has its place, and its being's end and aim, so in revelation, every truth has its position and is designed and fitted to serve some purpose wise and good. Truth is a Divine system, and to corrupt or mutilate that system, is to impair its efficiency and mar its glory. The truth, then, in its integrity and purity, it is the Church's duty and highest interest to conserve; her firm resolve that of a French patriot, never to yield an inch of her territory or a stone of her fortresses to the enemy who seeks her overthrow.

And this duty, devolving upon all, has a special bearing on the Church to which we have the honour to belong. Special favour should stimulate to special fidelity. And it is a cause for deepest thankfulness that the Covenanting Church has ever been distinguished for jealous vigilance of the truth committed to her keeping. With a courage that has never faltered, and a watchfulness that has never slumbered, she has defended this the Thermopylæ of Christendom. In the best blood of her sons, and daughters too, she has written her love for the truth entrusted to her care. And, brethren, the time for furling our banner and abandoning our position is not yet. The truth still fails to command universal recognition. The enemy is still abroad. Many have succumbed to his assaults. The Divine command, the Church's well-being, our own interest and honour call us to fidelity—still to display a banner for the truth, assured that the God of truth is with us, and that the truth is mighty and shall one day prevail.

Further, we should take special interest in every work of a religious and philanthropic character.

To this truth our theme gives special emphasis. "What *do* ye more than others?" The Church is called to holiness and to fidelity in conserving the truth committed to her hands. But her duty does not end here. She is the divinely appointed agency for rescuing the world from the bondage of sin and bringing back its primeval glory and felicity.

The world is not as it came from the creative hand of God. By that dread catastrophe, of which Eden was the scene, it has been changed from Paradise into a wilderness. The enemy has triumphed—man has been ruined. Body, soul, and spirit, he writhes in the grasp of the demon sin. And to remedy this evil vain man himself has no power. Human wisdom here is folly; science and philosophy have been tried in vain. The malady which preys upon humanity is too deep-rooted and too deadly for human skill to heal. In presence of the ruin which sin has wrought we can but fold our hands in conscious impotence and turn our eyes to heaven. And blessed be God not in vain! The cry of perishing souls has come up before the throne of the Eternal. It is not His will that His fairest work should be destroyed, or that the world should be given over to the eternal reign of evil. No! He is the God of all Grace. He has provided a panacea for all the ills that flesh is heir to. He gave his only-begotton Son to be the Saviour of sin-ruined man. He has instituted the Church to be the guardian of the truth, and co-worker with God in rescuing the world from the bondage of Satan. And to this great work the Church must address herself in all fidelity and earnestness. She must be the grand reformer of society, the civilizer of the nations, the evangelizer of the world. Hers must must be the motto, "All for Christ!" Unfurling the banner of the cross, grasping the sword of the Spirit, she must go forth to the conflict, never resting until the enemy

has been vanquished, and the standard of King Jesus has been planted on the citadel of the empire of sin.

And, brethren, need we say that in the great work of evangelizing the world we should take a deep and prayerful interest? Some one has propounded the idea that the special mission of the Covenanting Church is not so much to be a worker as a witness. That this proposition embodies partial truth we grant, but that it covers the whole field of our duty we emphatically deny. The truth is not an end, but a means, and is to be conserved in order to promote the great purposes for which it has been revealed to man. Our Zion is not a repository of ornamental armour, but a magazine of weapons bright and keen for fighting the battles of God and of humanity. And, moreover, it is our deep conviction that inactivity would be the Church's bane. In man's physical and mental nature exercise is an essential condition of health and development. And so in the Church of Christ. The new life within her demands activity. Indolence would dwarf her growth, paralyze her strength, and render her the prey of evil. By work her powers are developed, strengthened, perfected. And, finally, we believe the best way of witnessing for Christ is by working for His glory. A testimony on paper, while it has its place and serves an important purpose, if alone, is of little value. To be a living power for good it must be inscribed in the Church's character and life, embodied in works of faith and labours of love. And that this is the mind of God we have the most conclusive evidence. "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good *works* and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

To this conclusion, then, we are driven by a logic that cannot be resisted; far from being called to fold our hands and stand idle in the Master's vineyard, we should be the most earnest

workers there. *More highly favoured*, we should *do* more than others. We should be the leaders of the Lord's host in battling with evil, in applying the balm of Gilead to a sin-diseased humanity, in hastening that bright millenial era yet to dawn, when our earth shall again become a paradise, and man shall regain his long-lost glory, and from every land the song of the redeemed shall be echoed back to heaven,—"SALVATION TO OUR GOD WHICH SITTETH UPON THE THRONE AND TO THE LAMB."